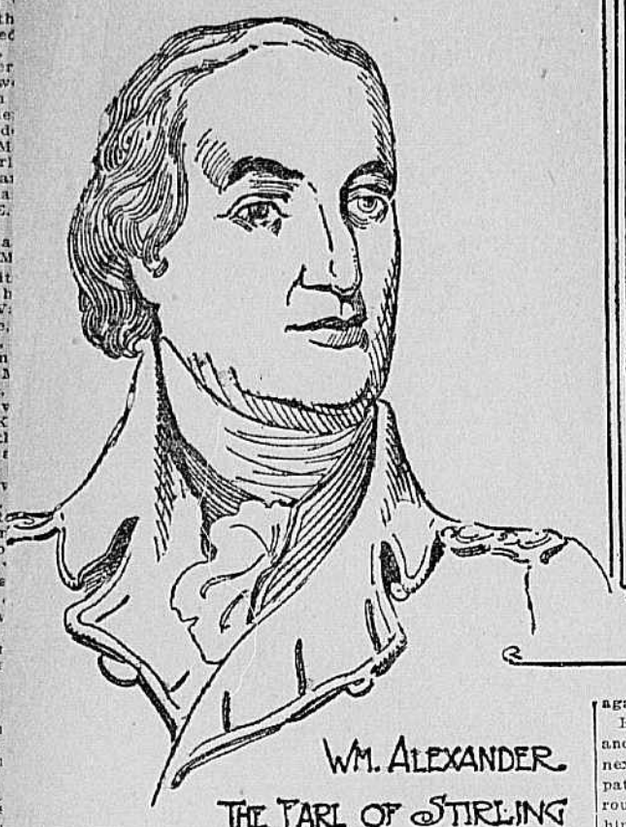
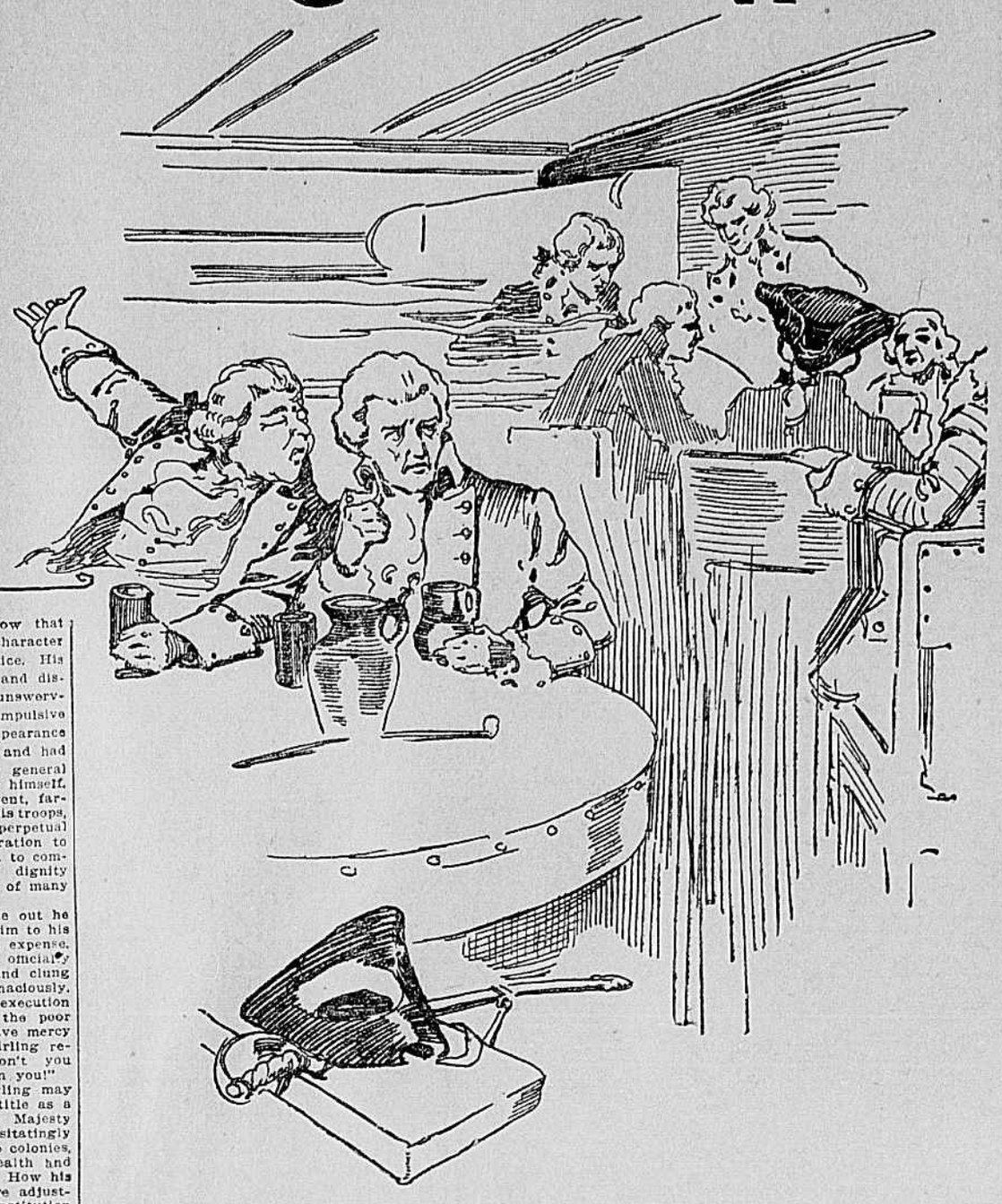
...RD STIRLING, THE ONLY BRITISH PEER WHO FOUGHT IN THE CONTINENTAL ARMY

THROUGH His Violation of the Laws of Hospitality He Saved the Life of Washington and the Future of the Young Republic. -:-



WM. ALEXANDER.
THE EARL OF STIRLING



RICHARD SPILLANE.

"Spri... the Earl of Stirling vio... honorof the laws of hospitality ... Fleet, General Washington im... attenews of a plot that he dis... Emmiainst him, it is quite prob... Louisar for Independence would ... Acreel into history as a rebellion ... enterbeen crushed instead of a ... day that succeeded.

...being... eral William Alexander, ... vases... Stirling, was the only Brit... Trave... the Continental Army. From ... Mrs... beginning he had laid his ... Street... his fortune at the altar of ... Carlo... at no time in the long years ... and ... ere the struggling colonies ... left ... ommander-in-chief of their ... weeks... such grave danger of des... turn ... in the winter of 1777-1778. ... in Pi... n, was encamped at Valley ... friend... he enemies of Washington ... Mrs... country seemed to be grow... Miss... erful in those dark hours. ... mond... ot was hatching, born of the ... trip. ... bitions of General Conway, ... Phila... ronto... up th... and ... ing t... tembe... Mr. ... little ... Wedn... Falls, ... and ... to th...

an Irish-French soldier of fortune, who had joined the Continental Army; Generals Gates and Mifflin, Samuel Adams, two or three of the New England delegates for Congress, and one of the Virginia deputies. Conway was the chief conspirator.

Colonel James Wilkinson, aide-de-camp to General Gates, was on his way to Annapolis, where Congress was then sitting, to announce the success at Saratoga. On his journey he stopped at Lord Stirling's headquarters at Reading, Pa., and dined that evening with the officers. Whatever deficiences there may have been in the menu were more than made up by the liberal supply of liquor which was served at this soldier's banquet. These were hard drinking days. By the time that the dinner was over everybody about the rude board was mellow. Wilkinson sat next to Major Williams, aide-de-camp to Lord Stirling. In a moment of drunken confidence Wilkinson imparted to Williams some of the details of the plot against the Commander-in-Chief.

Hardly had the emissary of Gates and Conway ridden on his journey the next morning when Lord Stirling dispatched another messenger by another route with instructions to spare neither himself or his horses in delivering at the earliest possible moment the triply sealed letter sewn in the lining of his waistcoat. This message told the Commander-in-Chief for the first time of the plot that was being hatched against him, and ended with these words: "Such wicked duplicity I shall always consider it my duty to detect."

As soon as the news of Wilkinson's babbling reached Washington he sternly called Conway to account. Conway rushed to Gates for aid, and Gates, flussy, inefficient, cowardly and old, tried to get out of the difficulty by branding Wilkinson as a liar. Wilkinson promptly challenged Gates to the duel, but Gates wept on his shoulder, called himself a feeble old man and induced him to withdraw the challenge. There was a duel between Washington's friend, General Cadwallader, and Conway. Cadwallader shot Conway through the mouth. Conway, believing himself dying, wrote Washington asking forgiveness for his villainies. He did not die, however, but left the Army and returned to France, where he died years later in poverty and exile.

Lord Stirling was severely criticized by his enemies for using information obtained through the convial indiscretion" of his guest, but replied that the result justified his action. He intimated that there was no law of hospitality which would forbid a host from exposing treachery to the cause to which he had pledged his life and his sacred honor. The breaking up of this tremendous plot to overthrow Washington, and perhaps the cause of the colonies, was the turning point in the great struggle for independence. If the Earl of Stirling had not dared deliberately to violate well established rules of conduct the war for freedom might have come to a sudden and inglorious end.

At the battle of Monmouth none rendered greater service than Mad Anthony Wayne and Lord Stirling in combating the treachery of Lee. In another fierce and bloody fight, the battle of Long Island, it was Stirling and a handful of his brave soldiers who threw themselves upon the gleaming fence of Hessian bayonets and sabres and held the mercenaries in check until the main body of the American troops had escaped. Washington and some of his officers were watching the battle from a hill near by. He supposed that Lord Stirling, seeing resistance would be useless, would surrender at once. But when Stirling, with his little troop, unhesitatingly attasked Cornwallis's army to engage his attention and cover the retreat, Washington cried out: "Good God! What brave fellows I must this day lose!"

Stirling was captured by the British and remained a prisoner on Lord Howe's flagship until he was exchanged some weeks later.

From the very beginning of the war the Earl of Stirling was a brilliant and commanding figure. In January, 1776, he boldly attacked a British man-of-war in New York Bay, laden with stores and provisions for the royal troops at Boston, and carried it into port at Perth Amboy. For this bold feat he received one of the earliest votes of thanks from the Continental Congress and an appointment as brigadier-general. He succeeded Lee in command of New York and fortified the harbor, building Forts Washington and Lee on opposite sides of the river above the city. Though these ancient fortifications are now obliterated, their names are still attached to the localities where they stood.

There was hardly a battle of importance in which the heroic figure of the Earl of Stirling does not loom large through the haze of history. Among these are the hard fought fields of Trenton, Brandywine, Garmantown, Monmouth, Long Island and Paulus Hook. Again and again the Earl of Stirling received the thanks of Congress for his distinguished services. He was a member of the court of inquiry convened at Tappan in 1778, to consider the case of Major Andre, the British spy.

The Earl of Stirling died at Albany in 1783, in the fifty-seventh year of his age. He was buried in the vault of his wife's ancestors in the old Dutch Church in Albany, and when that was demolished his remains were moved to the Episcopal cemetery. General Washington wrote a long letter of condolence to Lady Stirling, in which he said:

"It only remains, then, as a small but just tribute to the memory of Lord Stirling to express how deeply I share the common affliction on being deprived of the public and professional assistance as well as the private friendship of an officer of so high rank, with whom I have lived in the strictest habits of amity; and how much those military merits of His Lordship, which rendered him respected in his lifetime and now regretted by the whole army. It was doubtless to be a soothing consideration in the poignancy of your grief to find that the general officers are going into mourning for him."

The records that survive of the personality of Lord Stirling show that the dominant note in his character was the passionate love of justice. His political views were definite and distinct; his principles lofty and unswerving; his character generous, impulsive and fearless. In personal appearance he was distinctly impressive and had the most martial air of any general in the army save Washington himself. He was quick-witted, intelligent, far-seeing and vociferous among his troops, and his example was a perpetual source or strength and inspiration to them. His soldiers were wont to compare boastfully his courtly dignity with the brusque mannerisms of many foreign generals.

Before the Revolution broke out he prosecuted and proved the claim to his title with much difficulty and expense. He was invariable addressed officially and privately by that title and clung to his honors somewhat tenaciously. The story is told how, at the execution of a soldier for desertion, the poor criminal called out, "Lord, have mercy on me!" whereupon Lord Stirling replied with warmth: "I won't you rascal! I won't have mery on you!"

Whatever vanity Lord Stirling may have felt for his rank and title as a peer of the realms of His Majesty George III., it was unhesitatingly sacrificed for the cause of the colonies, together with all of his wealth and influence, which were great. How his claim to the title would have adjusted itself under the new Constitution in 1789, had he survived, is a matter of curious speculation. The Constitution forbade any person holding office under the Government accepting "any present, emolument, office, or title of any kind whatever." Probably he would have continued officially to enjoy his military title and to be known as Major-General William Alexander. In social life perhaps he might have been known as the Earl of Stirling.

The ancestry of Major General William Alexander, the Earl of Stirling, and his claim to the title is a story of romantic interest. The founder of the house was William Alexander, the poet, who was the friend and favorite of James VI. of Scotland, who succeeded Elizabeth as James I. of England. This monarch and his son successor, Charles I., demonstrated their affection for the court poet by creating him successively Lord Alexander of Tullibrodie, Viscount of Canada, Viscount and Earl of Stirling, Earl of Dovan.

These were not merely barren and high-sounding titles. They carried with them as gifts by charter or letters patent a vast empire in the New World. No poet ever was paid such a price for his songs as this rhyming ancestor of the hero of the Revolution. There were granted to him all of Nova Scotland Canada, including fifty leagues of bounds on both sides of the St. Lawrence River and the Great Lakes." King James knew little and cared less tbout the boundaries of Canada. For all the intelligence that he had regarding it Canada might have stretched westward to China and northward toBoreal Pole. But even these two mighty gifts were not all. The third was "a tract of Maine and the Island of Stirling and islands adjacent." "The "tract of Maine" embraced all east of the Kennebec River to Nova Scotia and included Newfoundland. The Island of Stirling is now known as Lond Island, and on the western end of this and on Manhattan Island, one of those "adjacent," stands to-day the city of New York, the second greatest city in all the world. It was the most prodigious gift ever bestowed on a subject by a British sovereign. Yet, huge as it was, the claims of the House of Stirling to this vast territory were subsequently confirmed and recognized by Charles I., and his successors.

Along with these titles and a landed empire as large as the continent of Europe came tremendous political and administrative powers. Among other, the Earl of Stirling had the power of appointing 150 baronets, called "Baronets of Nova Scotia," who were to take precedence over all other baronets. Under this power the first Earl of Stirling actually created more than 100 baronets. Nearly fifty of the baronets of Great Britain to-day owe their titles to patents granted by the first Earl of Stirling.

When New Amsterdam was under the Governorship of Peter Stuyvesant, in 1639, the Earl of Stirling sent an agent to America to claim the proprietorship of the Isles of Stirling, otherwise Long Island. The agent took possession of Shelter Island, but the Dutch arrested and deported him as an undesirable alien. Eight years later another agent arrived, and he also was promptly arrested and shipped to Holland by the doughty Dutch Governor.

No permanent colonization was effected under Lord Stirling's proprietorship, although several attempts were made to colonize little spots in the far-flung empire across the seas. In 1663 the third Earl of Stirling sold his rights to Long Island to James, Duke of York, when the latter came into possession of New York. The price fixed was £7,000 ($35,000)—a less sum than would be necssary to-day to purchase a front foot of ground where the skyscrapers stand on the lower part of Manhattan Island.

But the Stuarts were royally indifferent about paying their debts, and nine years later, the purchase price being still owing to the Earl of Stirlin, the Duke of York made a new contract with him by which he agreed to pay the Earl of Stirling out of the revenues arising from his province of New York, an annuity equal to $1,500 a year. This annuity was never paid, and in 1765, nearly a century later, Major-General Alexandria ,the Earl of Stirling, thinking, doubtless, his title clear, and two other heirs to the estates of Stirling, petitioned the King, praying for payment of the purchase money for Long Island granted to their ancestors.

It was afterwards discovered and claimed by his descendants that the Maine grant was also included in the instrument of transfer, quite by accident. A descendant of the first Earl in the female line, as late as the middle of the nineteenth century, attempted to establish a claim to this country, as well as to the Canada grant. But Henry, fifth and last Earl of Stirling in direct descent, died in 1789, childless. He was in full possession of his titles, but shorn of the American estates of his ancestors.

When Nova Scotia fell into the hands of the French in 1667, the British Government granted the Earl of Stirling £10,000 in compensation for loss, but the grant distinctly stated that it was "in no wise for quitting title to New Scotland." When, some hundred years later, the question of claims to American estates was inquired into by the heirs of the third Earl of Stirling, it was claimed that ing £10,000 never had been paid by the Government. So vanished the vast American estates of the first Earl of Stirling. To-day they exist onl in faded parchments with royal seals that have only a historical value.

The father of Major-General William Alexander was heir presumptive to the Earldom of Stirling when he left Scotland. His son went to England in 1755 and spent six years endeavoring to obtain the title of Earl of Stirling. Although he did not obtain a legal recognition of the title his rights to it were generally conceded, and from that time he was always addressed officially by the British Government as the Earl of Stirling. On his return to America in 1761 he married the daughter of Philip Livingston (the second Lord of the Manor), a sister of Governor Livingston, of New Jersey.

To-day the male line of the House of Stirling is extinct. It survives on the distaff side in the Duer family. Mrs. Clarence Mackay, who was Katherine A. Duer, is a direct descendant from the last of the Earlst of Stirling. (Copyright, 1910, by Richard Spillane.)